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ABSTRACT

Fast Start is a program designed to get primary grade children off to a successful start in learning to read through intensive and systematic parental involvement that is coordinated through the school and is based upon proven and effective methods of parent-child interaction around reading. The program is simple to learn, easy to implement, efficient in the amount of time invested by parents, and cost-effective for schools or other educational agencies wishing to implement it. In Fast Start, parents and children read a brief highly predictable and interesting text each day. The reading involves parents reading to children, neurological impress/paired reading, and moves toward children reading on their own. Repeated readings help build fluency, word recognition, and comprehension among children. After the text has been read, parents and children engage in word bank/word sort/sentence building activities using words from the current and previous texts. Preliminary studies of Fast Start have demonstrated that it can have positive effects on primary students' word recognition, fluency, and overall reading proficiency. (Contains 89 references.) (Author/RS)

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# Fast Start:
# A Parental Involvement Reading Program For Primary Grade Students

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**Abstract**

This paper describes a parental involvement/intervention reading program for primary grade students. Fast Start is a program designed to get primary grade children off to a successful start in learning to read through intensive and systematic parental involvement that is coordinated through the school and is based upon proven and effective methods of parent-child interaction around reading. Although the method is not well known by parents it is simple to learn, easy to implement, highly efficient in the amount of time invested by parents, and cost-effective for schools or other educational agencies wishing to implement it. For these reasons, Fast Start holds the promise of being an effective and useful tool for schools in involving parents in substantive literacy learning activities with their children.

In Fast Start parents and children read a brief highly predictable and interesting text each day. The reading involves parents reading to child, neurological impress/paired reading, and moves toward the child reading on his or her own. Repeated readings helps build fluency, word recognition, and comprehension among children. After the text has been read, parents and children engage in word bank/word sort/sentence building activities using words from the current and previous texts. Preliminary studies of the Fast Start have demonstrated that it can have positive effects on primary students word recognition, fluency, and overall reading proficiency.

**Fast Start:**

**A Parental Involvement Reading Program**

**For Primary Grade Students**

## BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

### Helping Children Progress in Reading

Although a critical and essential learning task of the primary grades (kindergarten, grades 1-3) is the reading and writing (literacy) development of students, many primary grade students experience considerable difficulty in acquiring adequate reading skills. According to data from the 1988 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading is a source of considerable difficulty for many primary grade readers. For example, over 25% of fourth grade students in the NAEP were unable to answer successfully specific information questions about a passage they had read and over a third were not successful in answering main idea questions. Results of the 1992 NAEP show similar results with the average 4th grade student in every state reading below the proficient level.

Difficulties in developing proficiency in the early grades can lead to severe academic difficulties throughout students' schooling. Longitudinal studies have found that third-grade students who are reading below grade level and have failed at least one grade are very unlikely to complete 12th grade (Lloyd, 1978; Kelly, Veldman, & McGuire, 1964). Moreover, efforts aimed at alleviating reading difficulties for students above third grade are seldom successful (Kenne-

dy, Birman, & Demaline, 1986). Thus, it is critical that primary grade students be given every opportunity and strong instructional support to develop early proficiency in reading. As Stanovich (1986) suggests, paraphrasing Walberg and Tsai (1984), "...individuals who have advantageous early educational experiences are able to utilize new educational experiences more efficiently."

During the primary grades two critical reading competencies that students must develop for further growth in reading are word recognition and reading fluency (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990; Freebody & Byrne, 1988; Perfetti, 1985, Stanovich, 1986). Word recognition refers to the ability to correctly identify or pronounce words from a written format while fluency refers to the ease or automaticity in identifying words, phrasing, and use of appropriate expression in reading connected written discourse. In a study of over 600 elementary students experiencing difficulty in reading, Rasinski and Padak (1993) found that fluency and, to a lesser extent, word recognition were the major reading problems confronting these students.

Despite the lack of evidence supporting the effectiveness of reading instruction intervention for older students, it is generally agreed that intervention and preventive programs for younger students hold the greatest promise for lasting success (Slavin, Karweit, & Madden, 1989). Reading Recovery (Pinnell, DeFord, & Lyons, 1988), an intervention program limited to first grade students

experiencing significant difficulty in reading, has been shown to be very successful in bringing first-graders up to par with their average achieving classmates and maintaining that position in subsequent years. Several other early intervention programs in reading have been developed and described (Pikulski, 1994). In all of the successful classroom based programs, the development of proficiency in word recognition and fluency are major goals.

Word recognition and fluency can be developed through a variety of instructional approaches. Perhaps the most significant way to develop these competencies is through extensive contextual reading (Stanovich, 1986). Yet, a considerable amount of research has shown that students who experience difficulty in reading actually do little contextual reading in or out of school (Allington, 1977, 1980, 1983a, 1983b, 1984; Fielding, Wilson, & Anderson, 1986; Nagy & Anderson, 1986). The evidence suggests that increased amounts of contextual reading is associated with and will lead to greater levels of achievement.

Effective instructional approaches for developing word recognition, fluency, and comprehension using whole texts and appropriate for young readers are known (Rasinski, 1989a). Among the most effective methods are modeling fluent reading and word recognition behavior (Beaver, 1982), repeated readings of whole texts (Dowhower, 1987; Herman, 1985; Hoffman, 1987; Koskinen & Blum, 1984, 1986; Samuels, 1979), providing online support while reading (Carbo, 1978;

Chomsky, 1976; Gamby, 1983; Heckelman, 1969; Laffey & Kelly, 1981; Schneeberg, 1977; Van Der Leij; 1981), and the use of predictable and patterned texts for younger readers (Walker & Rasinski, 1990). Rasinski (1989a) suggests that these "principles" of instruction in fluency and word recognition can be used to developed informed instructional approaches that combine the principles in effective and integrative lessons. Using such an orientation, Rasinski, Padak, Linek, and Sturtevant (1994) developed a "Fluency Development Les son" that proved highly successful in improving the fluency and overall reading proficiency of second grade students in an inner city school who were, in general, reading significantly below grade expectations prior to the intervention.

In sum, it is widely accepted that the primary grades are critical to students' current and later success in reading and school in general. Early intervention has been found to be effective in helping young children experiencing difficulty in learning to read. Two critical factors in developing early proficient reading are word recognition and fluency. Moreover, effective approaches for improving word recognition and fluency in young students are available. Thus, research suggests that supplementary and preventative instructional efforts aimed at improving the word recognition and fluency of primary grade readers offer tremendous potential for helping all primary students develop as proficient readers. We know the type of additional support that is required to help readers, we know how to present that

support to students, and when that support is most effective. The critical question, then, becomes, how can that additional support be provided when the school curriculum is full? One answer, I believe, is in the home.

**Parental Involvement and Children's Reading Progress**

Parent involvement has the potential for making a significant impact on children's education. Extensive reviews of research on the impact of parental involvement on their children's academic achievement has found that parents can play a major role in their children's academic success (Epstein, 1984, 1987; Henderson, 1987, 1988). Henderson, for example, concludes that parental involvement leads to improvements in student achievement, grades, tests scores, and overall academic performance. Moreover, she argues that parental involvement in education has the secondary but significant effect of improving the perceived effectiveness of schools by the local community and by academic evaluators, and positively influencing the dignity, respect and attitudes of both families and educators.

Studies of the effects of parental involvement on reading have demonstrated equally positive results. A line of research dating back to the mid 1960's has consistently found facilitative effects for parental involvement in their children's reading development at home (Bean, Southworth, Koebler, & Fotta, 1990; Durkin, 1966; Epstein & Becker, 1982; Greaney, 1986; Griffiths & Hamilton, 1984; Hannon, 1986a, 1986b, 1987; Hewison & Tizard, 1980; Lewis, 1990;

Manning & Manning, 1984; Miller, 1986; Shuck, Ulsh, & Platt, 1983; Tizard, Schofield, & Hewison, 1982; Topping, 1986, 1987). This research strongly suggests that when parents are involved in their children's reading in substantive, consistent, and ongoing ways, their children experience significant and substantial improvement in reading. Recent results from the 1992 NAEP indicate that students who had literacy related interactions within their families had higher levels of reading achievement than students reporting few or no such interactions.

Despite the great potential promised by parental involvement, actual attempts by schools and teachers to develop and maintain ongoing parent involvement programs in reading are rather few in number (Rasinski, 1989b). In a survey of elementary teachers, for example, Rasinski and Linek (1991) found that although over 90% of teachers felt that parental involvement was crucial to children's reading development, less than a third indicated that they made attempts to involve parents in the reading curriculum. Moreover, less than 40% of that number was satisfied with their efforts to involve parents. Similar findings have been reported in other studies (Becker & Epstein, 1982; Taylor & Leitman, 1991; Walde & Baker, 1990). Indeed, a review of the literature in this area reveals that there are no extant or proven models of parental involvement in reading and writing education in this country for whole classrooms of children. The most common type of reading and

writing program for parental involvement is the "one-shot" affair such as talks by local experts for parents, "make it and take it" workshops, mail order programs, and short term incentive programs. For all of these programs, there is no evidence of their effectiveness in improving students' reading or attitudes toward reading.

Several reasons have been cited for the poor record of parental involvement program efforts. These include lack of time, rewards, and administrative support for teachers, insufficient time for parents to work with their children, parents' lack of ability and motivation to implement learning activities with their children, lack of enjoyment and functionality of the learning experiences for parents and children, inconsistency of implementation, lack of appropriate materials as well as training and support from the school, the lack of real reading and informal interaction between parents and children, the questionable benefits for certain subgroups of students such as older students, and the unwillingness of parents to take responsibility for the education of their children (Epstein & Baker, 1982; Exceptional Child Center, 1976; Holsinger, 1979; Rasinski & Fredericks, 1989; Roling, 1981; Walde & Baker, 1990). The obstacles to real and substantive parental involvement in reading are considerable, but research does indicate that most parents are willing to work with teachers and schools to help their children achieve academically (Chavkin & Williams, 1985; Granowsky, Middleton, & Mumford, 1979;

Rasinski & Fredericks, 1989; Williams & Stallworth, 1983-1984).

Moreover, as noted earlier in this paper, the amount of reading done outside school is positively associated with progress in reading. Nevertheless, most students do very little reading at home. In one study of fifth graders who were asked to keep logs of their out-of-school reading, it was found that the students spent less than 5 minutes per day in contextual reading (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1985). Thus, although students do not currently engage in extensive reading at home, the potential for improving this situation and students' reading through active parental involvement is enormous.

In response to the reasons cited for problems in initiating and maintaining parental involvement programs Rasinski (1995; Rasinski & Fredericks, 1987) has identified a set of principles or characteristics that can guide educators in the development of effective and lasting parental involvement programs in reading. These principles include the following: 1) develop instructional activities for parents that are based upon proven and effective strategies for promoting growth in reading; 2) make the instructional activity parents are to engage in with their children simple, brief, easy to implement, and consistent from one day to the next; 3) provide effective initial and follow up training, communication, and support for parents; 4) insure that the activity involves real reading of authentic texts;

5) provide texts and other materials for parents; 6) insure that the instructional activity is enjoyable for parents and children, that it can be implemented in an informal and interactive manner, guided both by parents and children, and that parents provide positive encouragement and reinforcement to their children; 7) provide mechanisms for parents to document and account for their work with their children; 8) plan for the long term, be consistent in terms of the activities parents and children are asked to engage in (do not plan major changes or disruptions in the instructional activities and procedures for parents and children, rather vary texts and how parents and children respond to the reading). Research does indicate that when even a limited number of potentially problematic areas are addressed parental programs can be effective (e.g. Clegg, 1973; Glynn, McNaughton, Robinson, & Quinn, 1979; Holsinger, 1979; Hoskisson, 1975; Keele & Harrison, 1972; Meckler, 1972; Morgan & Lyon, 1979; Mudre & McCormick, 1989; Neidermeyer, 1970; Ryback & Staats, 1970; Smith, 1971; Sullivan & La Beaune, 1970; Thurston, 1977).

The Fast Start program embodies these principles in an informal instructional package that is very workable, motivating, and time efficient for parents and children (see description below).

**The Fast Start Parental Involvement Program in Reading**

The goals of the Fast Start Program are to increase all student participants' reading achievement through long term

parent involvement using effective strategies to increase the amount of contextual reading done by students and improve reading fluency, word recognition, and comprehension. Second, the program aims to improve parental perceptions of teachers and schools, and teacher perceptions of the role of parents in the educational process. The Fast Start program adheres to all of Rasinski's principles of effective parental involvement programs.

The Fast Start program consists of an instructional procedure that parents are asked to implement on a daily basis. It involves the following steps:

1. Parents are provided with short whole texts selected by the school or teacher for their content, patterned and predictable nature, and appropriate readability for first grade. Nursery rhymes and verse poetry are examples of the type of texts that will be chosen.

2. Parents are asked to work with their children daily for 10-15 minutes at a regular, specified, and convenient time.

3. Parent and child sit together. Parent and child read text in the following manner. Parent draws child's attention to the text while reading by pointing to the appropriate lines and words.

   a. Parent reads text to child several times until child is familiar with the passage. Parent and child discuss content of the passage.

   b. Parent and child simultaneously read passage in a

manner similar to Paired Reading or Neurological Impress reading. Passage is read several times until child feels comfortable with reading the text alone.

c. Child reads text alone with parent providing backup or shadow reading support. Text is again read several times.

4. After having read the text, parent and child each choose one or two words of interest from the text. The words are printed on cards, added to word cards from previous days, and used for word practice, sentence building, word sorts, and other informal word games and activities.

5. Parents keep a daily log of the time spent working with their children, the text used, and the activities engaged in. The log is turned in periodically to the school.

6. Parents work with their children in this way daily, if possible. Parents may work with one passage over several days and may return to previously read passages throughout the duration of project.

7. Parents will also be encouraged throughout the duration of the project to read to their children as much as possible, to write with their children, and to create a home environment conducive to literacy learning. Specific suggestions for accomplishing this will be given to parents in a regular newsletter.

The reading activities that are central to Fast Start are based upon proven methods for developing word recognition, fluency, and comprehension (Rasinski, 1989a). The word study activities are designed to develop students' phonemic awareness (Adams, 1990) and phonic knowledge of onsets and rimes (Cunningham, 1991; Cunningham & Cunningham, 1992; Stahl, 1992) in an informal and interactive manner.

Parents are given specific training on the Fast Start method that consists of a 90 minute explanation and demonstration with reference and resource materials that parents can keep. Multiple training sessions are offered as well as individual consultations in person or by telephone with parents. Parents are also sent written follow up materials in the form of newsletters that will provide additional information on refining, extending, and providing variation to Fast Start. Other information related to the literacy development of young students is also shared in the newsletters. Teachers monitor completed log sheets returned by parents and will contact those parents who appear to be experiencing difficulty in implementing the project. An end of the program session is given for parents in order to thank parents for their participation, obtain feedback on their perceptions of the program, and provide parents with information on continuing their children's development in literacy in the future.

At the beginning of each month children take home a packet of texts to read with their parents using the Fast

Start method, a newsletter that will provide additional information on the program and ideas for extending the reading into games and other enjoyable family activities, and a monthly log sheet on which parents are asked to record their daily participation in Fast Start with their children. Parents are asked to return the previous month's log sheet upon receipt of the new month's packet. This monthly procedure begins after the initial training session and run through the end of the program.

## EVALUATION

Fast Start was implemented in an informal pilot study with children who receive corrective reading instruction at the university reading clinic and their parents. Students who were part of the group receiving the Fast Start supplementary instruction made substantially greater improvements in reading than students who were not involved in the program. Moreover, the level of student growth in reading was positively and significantly correlated with the degree of parent involvement in the program. Significant correlations, in the range of magnitude of r =.60 to .79, were found for levels of parental involvement and student growth in word recognition and reading fluency. These results are particularly impressive in light of the fact that the duration of the pilot program was four weeks and students who participated in the study were significantly delayed in their reading development.

Teachers and schools also benefit from the Fast Start program as parents become more aware and appreciative of the work of schools and teachers. Parents benefit from becoming better able to help their children in their academic work. Teachers and parents benefit from more open and mutually supportive lines of communication between home and school.

Although the Fast Start program is relatively new and has been implemented and tested on an informal basis, the potential for it effect on children's reading development is clear. The program is theoretically sound. It based upon acknowledged theory and research in reading and parent involvement as well as proven methods of instruction. Preliminary implementation of the program over several multiple week periods have demonstrated very promising results.

In addition to the potential effectiveness of Fast Start, the program has several pragmatic features which make it additionally attractive to schools and parents. It very economical in terms of cost and time. The major cost is providing parents with materials. If public domain material such as nursery rhymes are used the major expense is the duplication of the texts and newsletters. I estimate that an eight-month Fast Start implementation for 25 students would cost less than $300 total. This amount pales in comparison with other early intervention programs. Dyer (1992), for example, estimates that the cost for Reading Recovery instruction for one child for a half year is over

$2,000.

Time involvement for teachers is also minimized since parents are the ones who are providing the instruction. The major time commitments is in the form of parent training and development of materials. Based upon my own experience with the program, I estimate that, at most, a classroom teacher would need three hours per month to implement the program in the first year. Succeeding year would require even less time commitments.

For parents and children, the program is easy to learn and implement; it requires only about 15 minutes per session; and parents and children find the activities enjoyable when approached in an interactive and informal manner.

Its time reading professionals take systematic parent involvement seriously. Research has provided clear evidence that parental involvement in education has positive effects on children's learning. The Fast Start program described here is an early attempt to make systematic parent involvement in reading a reality. The promising results to date hopefully will lead to other models of effective and efficient parent involvement that will make learning to read a bit easier and more meaningful for many children.

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